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SUBJECT: CROATIAN PM SANADER RECEIVES POSITIVE SIGNALS FROM  
ALLIES ON CHANCES FOR NATO INVITATION IN 2008

REF: SECSTATE 77485

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Richard G. Olson for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Allies indicated strong support for Croatia's NATO candidacy during a June 6 meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) with Croatian PM Sanader, but warned that Croatia should not lose momentum in its reform efforts. Allies focused on the need for Croatia to continue to make progress in raising public support for NATO membership, judicial reforms and ICTY cooperation, defense reforms, refugee returns and property restitution, and mechanisms for handling NATO classified information. Sanader told Allies Croatia was making progress in its campaign to raise public support for NATO membership and was committed to moving ahead on all reforms since he saw no alternative for Croatia and the region than eventual NATO and EU membership. Ambassador Nuland emphasized U.S. support for Croatia's candidacy, praised Croatia's contributions to NATO operations and urged Croatia to continue to mentor Albania and Macedonia in their own NATO bids. END SUMMARY.

SANADER CROATIA'S PROGRESS GOOD FOR THE REGION

12. (C) Addressing a June 6 meeting of the NAC to review Croatia's progress under NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), PM Sanader recalled that he last visited NATO in January 2006, shortly after the arrest and transfer to the ICTY of General Ante Gotovina. He stressed that today Croatia remained fully committed to ICTY cooperation and noted the ICTY had decided to transfer two war crimes cases to Croatia for trial, important evidence of the trust of the international community in Croatia's judiciary.

13. (C) Sanader expressed appreciation for the encouraging signals on NATO enlargement from the 2006 NATO Riga Summit Declaration, which he said motivated Croatia to continue reforms. Sanader said he believed Croatia's progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration sent a strong message to the region and he thanked the NAC for the Riga Summit decision to admit Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Partnership for Peace.

14. (C) Sanader pointed to polls conducted in May indicating public support in Croatia for joining NATO had risen to 52 percent, up from 36 percent at the end of last year. He believed the increase was due to the Croatian government's communication strategy that involved all the senior leadership, positive messages from NATO at Riga that made membership seem a realistic possibility, and the strong showing of the Serb Radical Party in Serbia in recent elections.

15. (C) On Kosovo, Sanader reiterated Croatia's support for the Ahtisaari plan. Croatia would adhere to the EU position on Kosovo and not take any "unilateral positions." He

stressed that Bosnia and Herzegovina must remain unified, even if Kosovo was granted independence. There could not be any partition in BiH or independence referendum in Republika Srpska. BiH should remain a strong and unique state where the three peoples have equal status, a principle that should be maintained in any future constitutional reforms.

#### ALLIES ENCOURAGING, WARN TO KEEP UP MOMENTUM

¶6. (C) All Allies (with the exception of Luxembourg) took the floor, sending many encouraging signals to Croatia on its prospects for receiving an invitation at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest to join the Alliance. Hungarian Perm Rep Martinusz said there was "every reason to be optimistic" about an invitation at the Summit. Czech Perm Rep Fule said Croatia was the leading candidate to receive a membership invitation, but the final decision would be based on performance. Romanian Perm Rep Ducaru said it looked forward to having Croatia invited into NATO at the next Summit. Lithuanian Perm Rep Linkevicius said the successful completion of the next MAP cycle should lead to an invitation in 2008. French Perm Rep Duque expressed the hope Croatia would be able to join the Alliance as soon as possible.

¶7. (C) Allies also sent a consistent message on the need to maintain momentum in reforms, especially increasing public support for NATO membership, judicial reforms, refugee returns, protection of NATO classified materials, and defense budgeting. UK Perm Rep Eldon noted NATO invitations in 2008 "are not guaranteed". Norwegian Perm Rep Traavik said Norway would like to see Croatia in the Alliance as soon as possible, but added that invitations were not a foregone conclusion and must be earned.

USNATO 00000360 002 OF 003

¶8. (C) Ambassador Nuland noted it was no secret how much the President wanted to invite Croatia to join the Alliance. She said the only real risk for Croatia was losing momentum in its reforms efforts, specifically increasing public support, completing the refugee return process, and reforming the judiciary. She praised the government's public information campaign, but urged Croatia to ensure its polling was rigorous and unbiased to bolster its credibility. She commended Croatia for its contributions to NATO operations, especially ISAF where its forces serve without caveats and with costs fully covered. She encouraged Croatia to continue to mentor Macedonia and Albania in their efforts to meet NATO membership standards and to complete preparations for handling NATO classified information, an issue other new Allies had struggled to complete before accession.

#### PRAISE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO OPERATIONS, MIXED REVIEWS ON DEFENSE

¶9. (C) Croatia was praised by a majority of the Perm Reps for its contributions to peace support operations. General Hennault, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, noted he had received a positive impression of Croatia's military during his visit there in October 2006 and was impressed with the quality of Croatian soldiers deployed to ISAF. The UK welcomed Croatia's decision to purchase two new AN-2 transport aircraft, and suggested they do more in this area.

¶10. (C) Croatia also heard that defense reforms needed to be intensified and sustained from Greece and the Netherlands, specifically in the area of improving living standards for troops. Both Poland and Italy felt Croatia had more to do in defense efforts, while Slovenia noted they needed to avoid spending resources on areas that did not contribute to the military's overall strength (likely a reference to Croatia's plans to purchase fighter aircraft). The Czech Republic asked whether Zagreb intended to amend the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds parliamentary majority to deploy troops abroad. PM Sanader commented that Croatia would amend the Constitution next year to address that issue. He also

said he could guarantee the government would raise the level of defense spending to 2 percent of GDP by 2010 as planned.

#### PUBLIC OPINION

¶11. (C) Sanader expressed his appreciation of Allies' positive comments and said NATO's support and encouragement was important psychologically, since support for NATO increases among Croatians the more they feel welcomed by NATO. He acknowledged different polls were producing divergent results, but noted there were some with even higher levels of support than the 52 percent he cited. In any case, there was a clear trend of increasing support for NATO. He added, "I will be fighting for NATO because I believe it is the only course for Croatia and the region."

#### JUDICIAL REFORM

¶12. (C) Sanader said almost all measures in the government's 2005 judicial reform strategy had been implemented. The backlog of court cases had dropped 36 percent from the previous year, cases would now be assigned to judges on a random basis, and every court would be on the internet by 2008 allowing citizens to check the progress of any case on-line. In addition, the cadastre and land registry was now available on the internet. Croatia had instituted a one-stop shop for business registration, making it easier for entrepreneurs to open new businesses and reducing the opportunities for corruption.

#### REFUGEE RETURNS, NATO CLASSIFIED, MENTORING THE A-3

¶13. (C) On refugee returns and relations with minorities, Sanader noted his governing coalition included seven minority members of the Sabor who have remained in the coalition for the three and a half years his government had been in power, a mark of satisfaction with his policy toward minorities. Regarding protection of NATO classified, Sanader said the required three pieces of legislation would soon be put into Parliamentary procedure and he expected the Sabor to adopt them this summer during its current session.

¶14. (C) In response to Ambassador Nuland's comment on the need to mentor the other members of the A-3, Sanader said Croatia would continue to help them. He said he would commit himself and the country in his June 10 meeting with President Bush in Tirana and "will do it not only because of our hopes for an invitation but because I believe strong cooperation is important for all in the region and would do it even without NATO and the EU."

USNATO 00000360 003 OF 003

¶15. (C) In response to the Czech Republic's question on the possibility of a referendum on NATO membership, Sanader said the constitution did not require one. It was possible, however, that some opposition parties might demand during the election campaign that there be a referendum. Sanader said he would attack any party that made that demand as being against NATO.

¶16. (C) Sanader closed by saying the meeting with Allies had been very encouraging for him and it had contributed even more to his personal engagement and that of his government.

NULAND